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**Rewriting Women's Destinies: Gender, Power, and Resistance in
Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother***

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Abstract

Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* presents a compelling narrative that challenges patriarchal structures by reimagining the destinies of its female protagonists. This paper explores how Gokhale sabotages traditional gender roles, portraying women as agents of their own transformation rather than passive victims of

societal norms. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism, this study examines the themes of gender, power, and resistance in the novel, focusing on how women reclaim their autonomy in the face of oppression. At the heart of the novel is Ammi, an aging yet formidable matriarch, and her orphaned granddaughter, who navigate the margins of society in Delhi's streets. Unlike conventional representations of female characters as submissive or dependent, Gokhale's protagonists embody resilience and self-determination. Ammi, a former courtesan turned beggar, defies moralistic judgments and redefines survival on her own terms. She imparts wisdom through oral storytelling, a tool that enables the young girl to construct her identity outside patriarchal expectations. By rejecting conventional femininity and embracing unconventional means of survival, Amma and her granddaughter disrupt normative gender roles. This paper also highlights the role of language and folklore in shaping female agency. Amma's stories serve as a counter-narrative to dominant patriarchal discourses, providing the protagonist with an alternative framework for understanding power. The novel reinterprets myth and tradition, shifting the focus from male-centered narratives to female resilience and adaptability.

Keywords: Feminism, New Woman, Gender, Power and Resistance.

1. Introduction

Namita Gokhale's novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* offers a compelling exploration of gender dynamics, power structures, and female resistance in contemporary Indian society. Through the narrative of Gudiya and her grandmother, Ammi, Gokhale challenges traditional notions of women's roles and destinies. The novel delves into themes of religious exploitation, societal expectations, and the struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal framework. By portraying characters who subvert conventional norms and forge their own paths, Gokhale presents a nuanced critique of gender-based oppression while highlighting the resilience and agency of women. This work not only contributes to the discourse on feminist literature in India but also provides poignant commentary on the intersection of gender, religion, and social hierarchies in shaping women's lives and identities.

1.1. Literature review

This literary analysis examines Namita Gokhale's novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* through the framework of feminist theory, investigating the author's portrayal of women's agency and resistance to patriarchal structures. The review explores the methods by which Gokhale's characters challenge conventional gender roles and societal expectations, thereby redefining their trajectories. By concentrating on themes of power dynamics and female empowerment, the analysis seeks to elucidate the novel's contributions to contemporary discourse on gender equality and women's rights in literature.

1.2. Research questions

This study seeks to explore the complex dynamics of gender, power, and resistance in Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*. Key questions guiding this research include: How does the narrative depict the struggles and resilience of women against patriarchal structures? In what ways do acts of resistance, such as the grandmother's transformation of a stolen marble slab into a sacred object, symbolize empowerment? How does the novel address the intersectionality of gender and socio-economic challenges?

What narrative strategies does Gokhale employ to portray the subversion of societal norms by her characters? Additionally, how do themes of agency and destiny unfold in the journey of Gudiya and her grandmother? These questions aim to uncover how Gokhale's work contributes to feminist discourses within contemporary Indian literature.

2. Discussions

Namita Gokhale is a trailblazing Indian author, editor, and publisher whose literary work significantly contributes to feminist discourse in contemporary Indian literature. Born on January 26, 1956, in Lucknow, India, she has consistently challenged traditional narratives and patriarchal constructs through her thought-provoking storytelling. As the co-founder and co-director of the Jaipur Literature Festival, Gokhale has also amplified diverse and marginalized voices, further solidifying her commitment to the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality.

Her debut novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), boldly critiqued societal hypocrisies and unveiled the complexities of women's desires and agency in a patriarchal

society. Through novels like *Gods, Graves, and Grandmother* (1994), *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), and *The Book of Shadows* (1999), Gokhale has illuminated the resilience of women navigating societal constraints. Her characters often resist oppressive structures, reclaim their power, and rewrite their destinies, making her a pivotal voice in feminist literature.

Gokhale's works are deeply rooted in Indian culture and mythology, but they subvert traditional roles to reimagine women as agents of change. By addressing themes of power, identity, and resistance, her writing serves as a potent critique of gender-based inequities while celebrating the strength and solidarity of women. Her profound impact on feminist thought and her dedication to uplifting women's voices make her a luminary in the literary world.

Namita Gokhale's second novel, *Gods, Graves, and Grandmother*, released in 1994, is a contemporary novel about the protagonist, Gudiya Rani. The story is presented as a confessional description of the narrator's own experiences and those associated with the temple. Many imposters in India take advantage of people's religious sensitivities and fool them. The story plainly criticises persons who abuse people's religious trust through its characters, and it brilliantly depicts the search for identity of poor metropolitan migrants who are emotionally deceived in order to get wealthy rapidly. It also depicts a woman's agonising search for her identity inside the socio-cultural milieu. She is always an advocate for downtrodden women and their distinctive approaches to issues. Gokhale's writing centres on the status of Indian women and their efforts to rebel against the status quo. Gokhale discusses gender disparity, power dynamics, and women's resistance through the protagonist Gudiya Rani's experiences in the novel.

In this novel, the majority of the characters are female, with a few males serving as supports or playing supporting roles. Gudiya, the novel's protagonist, is admitted to the second grade at St. Jude's Academy for the Socially Handicapped. The eleven-year-old girl acquired the pale-gold skin from an Afghan forebear or Ferangi customer. She is unaware of her father's heritage. From then, her search for identity begins. She is continually looking for a nickname that is appropriate for the new personality she is waiting for. Her desire for identification causes her to obsessively think about her father and surname. In order to prevent being identified as a prostitute's child, she eventually adopts her new name, Pooja Abhimanyu Singh, and fabricates a story about her parents' star-crossed love.

The novel presents two types of women as mirrors of society. One is of a grandmother who believes that education has no place in a woman's life. She always advises Gudiya to master a culinary expertise in order to attract a respectable man. Another one is Roxanne Lamba, who understands the value of education. She urges Gudiya to continue her studies and supports her from all angles. India's progress can be understood as a means of creating a social climate in which people can make their own decisions. Female education has a significant impact on India's overall development. Education increases women's abilities to gain information, influence, and achieve their goals. After the demise of Gudiya's grandmother, she slowly loses her interest in education.

When Gudiya starts menstruating, she knows nothing about puberty. She is confined to her chamber because everyone believes that menstruation women are impure or cursed. That notion is frequently used to discourage women from participating in social activities or attending school. Menstrual myths have been widespread in India since antiquity. Women are not receiving appropriate education on puberty and menstrual hygiene management, which is critical. Ammi regards Gudiya as a sorrow and a burden, who must be shielded from the gaze of violent men and will require special care from now on. Gudiya is intrigued by her grandmother, Ammi, who embodies the power of female resistance. 'Nothing but trouble,' grandmother gabbled, for her teeth had begun to foil her, 'this girl is good for nothing but trouble from now.' A look of pure virulent hatred crossed her face. She looked like a wicked old witch, and I hated her passionately and with all my heart. (54)

Gudiya is delighted to have a handsome and virile husband. She is drawn to Kalki after their first encounter on an odd night on Delhi Street. As a young woman, she is influenced by Hema Malini from the film *Sholay*. Like most women, she is fascinated in astrology and wants to know what her future holds. She seeks security and love in the institution of marriage. However, her marriage to Kalki has left her profoundly disappointed. She is unable to cope with her spouse, who mistreats and beats her on a daily basis. She develops hatred for her spouse after learning that he married her for money and carnal desires. Before marriage, she was raped by Kalki and discovered to be four months pregnant. Premarital relationships are never encouraged in Indian society or culture. So Gudiya requires a legal father for her child, and the marriage meets that requirement. Kalki had left her to pursue a career in cinema in Bombay. Then there's no communication between them. She begins her life in the company of Phoolwati, together with her young daughter Mallika. "I often dream about my mother, but she is elusive even there.

Grandmother is dead, Roxanne is dead, Sundar is dead. Even Kalki is gone, but the end of the world is nowhere in sight.” (240) Gudiya is portrayed as a strong, independent lady who prefers to live her life without the presence and assistance of her spouse. She is a fresh lady with the guts to face any task. She inspires women who desire to defy conventional norms and live independent lifestyles. Her persona challenges traditional gender roles and encourages women to be autonomous.

Phoolwati is an attractive woman with a more dominant attitude and extensive economic knowledge than her late spouse Shambu. She took over the tea stall after Shambu's death. She has also put up another kiosk outside the shrine selling incense sticks, marigold garlands, coconuts and small brass amulets from Moradabad. She has always devised strategies to boost the value of the shrine. In the institution of marriage, Indian women are completely dependent on their husbands. However, in this novel, Namita Gokhale introduces Phoolwati, who completely reverses the role by standing on her own legs and conducting her business on her own terms and conditions. Her dignity, intelligence, perseverance and goodwill give strength to young Gudiya. When she longs for her grandmother's unconditional love and support, Phoolwati is always there for her.

Vishesh and Varshney notice: “Her women characters show their abilities in financial matters too. They not only stand on their own legs but also prosper by leaps and bounds. They are ready to face the world alone without the support of men in their lives” (2).

Phoolwati is a courageous woman who stands alone even after her husband's death leaves her with only the tea shop. She manages everything meticulously on her own, even negotiating business with Sundar Pahalwan. When she marries Sundar again, she lives a luxurious life in her modest house. She is lauded for her astute and brilliant thoughts throughout their attempt to rescue all of the gold from the holy sanctuary.

She is portrayed as a brave woman who can confront any challenge without moaning about the negative events in her life. When Sundar is killed by his enemies, Gokhale depicts how she faces the unavoidable death of Sundar. Phoolwati did not scream or cry out or weep or respond in any of the ways I might have expected. Instead, quietly, and with great dignity, she slowly dragged Sundar's body back into the house. Then she sat down beside him and began systematically breaking her green glass bangle on the cold marble floor. (235)

Ammi (Grandmother) is one of the primary characters who is mentioned specifically in the novel's title. She is a knowledgeable woman who exudes confidence and

presence of mind. After Gudiya's mother disappears, they are forced to confront acute poverty, which they had never encountered before in their journey. Ammi erected the holy shrine beneath the peepul tree using stolen green marbles, river stones, and sacred flowers to earn money to feed herself and her family. She has sparked a religious fire in the hearts of passersby. Long ago, she was a fantastic singer, and it was her only expertise, so she used to sing bhajans and discuss religious concepts in the evening. In a short amount of time, she established herself as a religious leader. She has a thorough understanding of human psychology; with her pleasant voice, she has gained popularity in Delhi, and people from all over the city flock to seek her blessings. Sundar Pahalwan demands money from Ammi because he has territorial rights over the stretch of pavement. When Ammi suddenly assumes the role of Brahmin widow and says, "Seize our money, Pahalwanji, but spare our self- respect. I am the widow of a Brahmin, my husband was a priest, guard your tongue or else a virtuous woman's curses may follow you!" (12).

People around them hold superstitious beliefs and imaginations about Grandmother. They assume Grandmother is a century-old woman. She is casting magic spells that could change the gender of an unborn child. She is completely committed to the character she is playing, and she works extremely hard to blend in. She gets along well with the temple, its adherents, and the rituals that must be followed there.

Feminist research suggests that bright upper-class women maintain their rigidity. Roxanne Lamba, a Parsi woman with an education from England, is an excellent example. She is a social worker with a broad perspective. She owns and operates the Sharp Blade Company, a well-known blade manufacturer and distributor. She enjoys showing affection, and she especially likes Gudiya. Despite being wealthy, she is childless. Her existence lacks enthusiasm and vigour. In contrast to Ammi, Gudiya and Phoolwati, she leads a passive existence. She is generous and understanding enough to give Gudiya a portion of her fortune. She is more resilient than her unemployed, unfocused, and uncommitted spouse, Lamba. Despite her generous and compassionate character, she demonstrates a level of fortitude and resolve that her hubby does not, making her a role model for others around her. Her actions towards Gudiya also indicate empathy and a willingness to assist those in need. Gudiya makes the following observations on Roxanne: "She was the entirely good person I had ever encountered. From the time I had joined St. Jude's, she had encouraged me to believe in myself and to trust in myself, and she in turn had always trusted and believed in me" (195).

The idea of new women is exemplified by the female characters in Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Grave and Grandmother*. They are the best example of how women's roles have changed in society since colonialism ended defying gender expectations and striving for autonomy and self-determination. Namita Gokhale illuminates the remarkable stories of women who have overturned barriers defied expectations and influenced Indian literature. Readers are inspired to continue the fight for gender equality and empowerment by Namita Gokhale's writing which highlights the importance of acknowledging the contributions made by women to the advancement of Indian literature and culture. Her creations serve as a reminder of the significant role women have always played in society and the need to honour their accomplishments. The works of Namita Gokhale whose works challenge traditional gender norms in Indian culture and offer fresh perspectives introduce new and lesser-known female characters. By portraying these new female characters as strong independent and powerful Gokhale's work highlights how important it is to eradicate stereotypes that limit women's potential. The inclusion of such characters in Indian literature serves to more accurately depict India's rich and diverse cultural heritage in addition to highlighting the diversity and depth of women's lives.

3. Conclusions

Through an analysis of key scenes, this study argues that *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* reclaims women's destinies by portraying them as architects of their own fate. Gokhale's narrative resists the limitations imposed by patriarchy, instead offering a vision of female empowerment rooted in agency, storytelling, and resistance. The novel challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the strength and resilience of women in the face of adversity. By centering women's experiences and voices, Gokhale empowers readers to rethink societal norms and embrace a more inclusive and equitable future.

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